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Illinois
Environmental
Protection Agency

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Mercury,

What Every Citizen Should Know

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"The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency is working to reduce the use and release of mercury-containing products in an effort to reduce mercury contamination in Illinois. This booklet provides helpful information on what you as a consumer can do to help us reduce or eliminate mercury releases in our environment."

Renee Cipriano, Director
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

What is Mercury?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that does not break down. At room temperature, it is a silver colored liquid. As elemental mercury or methyl mercury, it can be a human health risk.

Why is Mercury a problem?

Breathing the vapor from spilled liquid elemental mercury can be poisonous, especially to children.

The most likely source of methyl mercury contamination in humans is from eating contaminated fish. Methyl mercury is easily absorbed and exposure can result in damage to the kidneys, the central nervous system, or a develping fetus.

"Eliminating human-created mercury discharges to land, air and water is an important means of reducing human exposure to mercury. As a first step in this process, getting mercury-containing products out of the personal environment, especially environments occupied by children, is the focus."

Quicksilver Caucus & the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Where is Mercury found?

In the home, schools or businesses mercury might be found in fluorescent lights, thermostats, thermometers, and even some children's toys.

Mercury can be released into the air when coal is burned as fuel without proper controls, or when mercury-containing garbage is incinerated. Mercury vapors contaminate soils and water when they combine with rain or snow and are deposited.

Mercury can also be deposited in water by direct discharge of mercury in industrial waste or municipal sewage. Once in water bodies, mercury accumulates in predator fish and can ultimately reach the dinner table.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources publishes an annual Fish Consumption Advisory. The advisory provides guidelines on how often fish from certain lakes and rivers can be safely eaten. For more information, or to obtain a copy of the Fish Advisory, call the Office of Land Management and Education at: 217-782-6302 or visit the web site at: www.dnr.state.il.us/fish/2002/40 pdf.

How do we eliminate Mercury?

Reducing the use of mercury containing products and properly disposing of mercury containing waste can help minimize mercury contamination in Illinois

Household Hazardous Waste Collections

Take mercury-containing products you already own, to a household hazardous waste collection facility. A schedule of these collections can be found at:

www.epa.state.il.us/land/hazardous-waste/household-haz-waste/hhwc-schedule.html.

Or contact your local Solid Waste Management Agency. Local governments may also sponsor household hazardous waste collections.

Additional information on mercury thermometer collections or the hazards of mercury can be obtained from the Illinois EPA Office of Pollution Prevention at: 217-782-8700

Alternative Products

Choose alternatives to mercury containing products, such as electronic thermometers and thermostats for home and school.

For information on alternatives contact Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Pollution Prevention:

217-782-8700

Recycling Programs

Determine if your school or office recycles its used fluorescent bulbs (which use mercury in the powder inside the glass). If not, help start a bulb-recycling program at your school or workplace.

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Spilled Mercury

For spills such as the amount of mercury in typical mercury fever thermometers.

- Keep other people and pets away from the spill area.
- Turn off heaters and air conditioners to minimize distribution of vapors.
- Ventilate the area by opening windows; if possible, keep open for at least two days after the cleanup.
- Avoid touching the mercury. Use gloves, preferably rubber gloves, to minimize contact with mercury.
- Remove jewelry and watches, as mercury will bond with the metal.
- Never use a broom or a vacuum to clean up a mercury spill. This may distribute it more and will contaminate the broom or vacuum.
- Do not place it in the garbage!

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Handling Spilled Mercury

- On a hard surface or tightly woven fabric use stiff paper to push the beads of mercury together. Use an eyedropper to suction the beads of mercury or working over a tray to catch any spills, lift the mercury with the paper, and then carefully place the mercury in a wide mouth container. Pick up any remaining beads of mercury with sticky tape and place contaminated tape in a plastic bag along with any tools used for clean up. They should be considered contaminated and disposed of with the mercury. Put the bag in a second bag and label it as mercury waste.
- Use a flashlight to locate all the mercury. The light will reflect off the mercury beads and make them easier to find.
- Cut out mercury-contaminated sections of carpet or rugs. The cutout section, along with all cleanup items, should be placed in a plastic bag labeled as mercury waste.
- In water, mercury will sink to the bottom. Remove as much water as possible without disturbing the mercury and recover the mercury with an eyedropper. Place in a wide mouth container, close and seal with tape, and label as mercury waste. In a drain, mercury will get caught in your sink trap. Working over a tray, remove the trap and pour the contents into a large mouth container, seal and label as above.

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Large Spills

For directions on how to clean spills of larger amounts of mercury (more than 2 tablespoons), and a guide to the possible health effects from mercury exposure contact the Illinois Department of Public Heath at: 217-782-5830.

Important Telephone Numbers

National Response Center
1-800-424-8802

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency,
Waste Reduction Unit
217-785-8604

https://archive.org/details/mercurywhatevery00unse

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